IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN:

- **Screening and supplemental data collection for English learners**
- **Basics of cross-linguistic transfer**
- **Differences between reading difficulty and language acquisition needs**

The Mass Literacy Guide emphasizes that an asset-based, culturally responsive practice views bilingual and bidialectical (proficiency in two dialects of the same language) children as having cultural and linguistic assets, not greater risk factors. In Massachusetts' Blueprint Dashboard For English Learner Success, shared responsibility for English learners (ELs) is identified as the first pillar of school culture. These principles of bilingualism as a valuable asset and shared responsibility for ELs are central to school culture, and become more critical for students who are simultaneously learning English and experiencing reading difficulty. It can be challenging to determine whether the student's difficulty is the result of less exposure to English or due to a neurological disability like dyslexia.[i][ii] As a consequence, English learners are often identified with specific learning disabilities and dyslexia much later as compared to their non-EL peers.[i][iii] However, it is possible to screen for risk of dyslexia in English learners, even when their language proficiency is developing at a different pace than their non-EL peers, in the early grades of pre-Kindergarten through grade two.

Is additional screening information needed for English learners?

Research indicates that English learners benefit from early screening and effective, early instruction.[iv][v] Therefore, bilingual children and ELs should not be excluded from universal literacy screening (see Chapters 3 and 4).[vi] However, while screening information is important in assessing whether English learners may be at risk for reading problems, the screening process should not end with a screening measure that focuses on decoding and phonemic skills.[vii] Additional data is needed to support whether reading difficulty stems from a lack of oral language proficiency or a possible reading disability:

- How long has the student been speaking the native language?

- What is the student's performance in their native language? Students with strong native literacy skills will likely require different support than students with weaker native language literacy skills.[viii]

- Is there a family history of reading difficulties? Because dyslexia has a genetic component, knowing whether an immediate family member may have had reading

difficulty can be helpful in determining whether the student's difficulty might be related to a disability.

● Is the student's first language one that promotes transfer to learning English (cross linguistic transfer)?

Recommendations for using screening tools with ELs[ix]

1. Use tools with demonstrated reliability and validity to identify and monitor students' need for instructional support in reading.
2. Assess students' language skills in reading in the native language (L1) and in English (second language or L2) to provide an appropriate context regarding evaluation of current levels of performance.
3. Evaluate the potential effect of the process of L1 and L2 acquisition on current performance.
4. Plan instruction based on what is known about the student's current level of performance and his or her literacy experiences in L1 and L2.

Brown and Stanford, [RTI for English Language Learners: Appropriately Using Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools to Improve Instructional Outcomes](), pp. 10-11.

In addition, the following information from students' educational history should be gathered:

• What level of English proficiency has been achieved?
• Are difficulties present in both the native language and English?
• Did the student experience delays in learning to talk or interruptions in their education?
• Have structured reading instruction and interventions been provided?[x]
• Have cognitive functions such as rapid automatized naming (RAN), phonological memory, basic phonemic awareness, and phonemic proficiency (advanced phonemic awareness) been assessed?

What is cross-linguistic transfer?

Geva and Wiener[v] suggest that understanding the typical development of learning to speak and read in a second language can be helpful in determining the causes for reading difficulty issues with English learners. Cross-linguistic transfer occurs when children are able to use knowledge of one language to assist the learning of a second language. Educators will want to know what elements of the first language are similar to or different from the second, and can aid or hinder English language development. For example, several examples of positive cross-linguistic transfer from Spanish to English occur in the many consonant sounds that exist in both languages such as /k/, /m/, /p/, and /t/. Another example are cognates, or words that are

spelled identically or similarly and sound similar in both languages, such as, for English and Spanish, *flexible/flexible*, *important/importante,* and *organization/organización.* When languages are more phonologically similar (have similar sounds), positive cross-linguistic transfer is more likely to occur. The greater the opportunities positive cross-linguistic transfer, the easier it becomes to learn to speak and read the language. Children at risk of dyslexia may have challenges with this positive transfer, especially as language deficits are often associated with dyslexia.

Even for languages with fewer opportunities for positive cross-linguistic transfer, students can still be taught the elements of English that differ from their primary language. Young students, particularly in grades K-2, can learn these language differences quickly. For example, although Chinese students learning English commonly struggle to differentiate between /th/ and /s/ sounds, these students can learn how to distinguish these sounds with careful and appropriate instruction.[v]

Persistent difficulty despite evidence-based instruction

There are two key warning signs that may indicate an EL's underlying learning difficulty with reading:

1. Students continue to experience persistent difficulties acquiring new language differences, e.g., phonemes not consistent with their native language, despite high quality, evidence-based instruction within an MTSS framework.

2. Students demonstrate more difficulties than their peers with similar language backgrounds, despite high-quality instruction.[xi]

A common misconception is that ELs need well-developed oral language proficiency before they can be assessed in word-level reading skills. In their summary of reading research, Geva and her colleagues assert the following:

> The research shows that phonological processing skills such as phonological awareness and rapid automatized naming are not strongly associated with language proficiency; that [these skills] can be reliably assessed in the L2 [second language]; and that they can be used to predict word reading skills to help understand the source of difficulties in learning to develop word level reading and spelling skills in the L2. This highlights the fact that second language assessment measures can be used reliably to assess L2 word reading skills (p. 128).[xi]

Many educators tend to attribute a student's degree of oral language proficiency as related to decoding skills, despite the student demonstrating persistent word recognition difficulties. However, oral language proficiency does not drive the development of word reading skills when learning a new language in the primary grades, but phonological skills do. Since phonological skills and rapid automatized naming have minimal association with oral language proficiency

but are highly correlated with word reading skills, assessing these two skills, along with additional data such as family history, level of language proficiency, and data about the *persistence* of difficulty compared to students with similar language backgrounds, can help to pinpoint language acquisition issues versus dyslexia.[xi]

Screening cognitive processing skills associated with word reading and spelling, such as phonological awareness, rapid automatized naming, and working memory, as well as student performance on decoding and word recognition skills, helps with the early detection of reading difficulties and risk of dyslexia.[11] These assessments, along with monitoring for persistent difficulty in pronouncing new English sounds that are different from native languages, decoding words and/or spelling, and using qualitative data can help educators better discern whether the source of a student's difficulty is oral language or a reading disability.

Research clearly shows that ELs benefit from instruction in all tiers that are 1) systematic and direct, structured instruction, 2) evidence-based, and 3) aligned to the five essential components of reading as outlined by the National Reading Panel.[iv] There is no need to wait until students' oral language proficiency is fully developed to assess ELs who are struggling in reading and provide them with evidence-based interventions to address their foundational skills needs.

TO LEARN MORE

Mass Literacy Guide: Pathway to Equity in Early Literacy

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Massachusetts Blueprint for English Learner Success

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. English Learners with Disabilities/Special Education

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Next Generation ESL Project: Model Curriculum Units developed by MATSOL, Northeast Comprehensive Center/WestEd and WIDA.

Multitiered Systems of Support for English Learners. (2019). Culturally and linguistically responsive response to intervention within multi-tiered system of supports: Fidelity of implementation rubric. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. Multitiered Systems of Support for English Learners. https://www.mtss4els.org/files/resource-files/CLRT-RTI-Rubric.pdf

Multitiered Systems of Support for English Learners. Resources Briefs

MTSS 4 Success. RTI for English language learners: Appropriately using screening and progress monitoring tools to improve instructional outcomes

MTSS 4 Success. [RTI: Considerations for English Language Learners (ELLs) "Placemat"](#)

Identifying ELLs with Specific Learning Disabilities: Facts, Advice, and Resources for School Teams (Identification Toolkits for ELLs with Specific Learning Disabilities on page 4). https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-Identifying-ELLs-with-Specific-Learning-Disabilities.pdf

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Phonemic Inventories and Cultural and Linguistic Information
https://www.asha.org/practice/multicultural/phono/
ASHA's compiled resources on the phonemic systems for 19 languages, plus American dialects

U.S. Department of Education. Best Practice for ELLs: Screening.
https://www.readingrockets.org/article/best-practice-ells-screening

Capin, P., Hall, C., & Vaughn, S. (2020). "[Evidence-Based Practices in the Treatment of Reading Disabilities Among English Learners.](#)" Perspectives on Language and Literacy, 46(2).

Literacy Instruction for ELLs - Early Literacy Instruction https://www.colorincolorado.org/early-literacy-instruction

Literacy Instruction for ELLs – Reading 101 for English Language Learners
https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/reading-101-english-language-learners

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/practiceguide/english_learners_pg_040114.pdf

Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/rti_reading_pg_021809.pdf

END NOTES

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[ii] Klingner, J. K., A. J. Artiles, and L. M. Barletta. (2006). "English language learners who struggle with reading or language acquisition or LD?" *Journal of Learning Disabilities.* 39 (2): 108–28.

[iii] Wagner, R. K., Francis, D. J., & Morris, R. D. (2005). Identifying English language learners with learning disabilities: Key challenges and possible approaches. Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 20(1), 6–15.

[iv] Gersten, R., Baker, S.K., Shanahan, T., Linan-Thompson, S., Collins, P., & Scarcella, R. (2007). Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide (NCEE 2007-4011). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides.

[v] Geva, E. & Wiener, J. (2015). Psychological assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse children: A practitioner's guide. Springer Publishing Co.

[vi] Share, D. L., and Stanovich, K. E. (1995). Cognitive processes in early reading development: A model of acquisition and individual differences. *Issues in Education: Contributions from Educational Psychology*, 1, 1-57.

[vii] Literacy screening may indicate that students need support in foundational reading skills but will not determine whether they also need English language development (ELD) instruction and comprehension strategies. Institute of Education Sciences, *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School,* p. 61.

[viii] Linan-Thompson, S. & Ortiz, A. (2009). "Response to Intervention and English Language Learners: Instructional and Assessment Considerations." *Seminars in Speech and Language* 30(2): 105-120.

[ix] Esparza Brown, J., & Sanford, A. (2011). *RTI for English language learners: Appropriately using screening and progress monitoring tools to improve instructional outcomes.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Response to Intervention. Retrieved from https://mtss4success.org/resource/rti-english-language-learners-appropriately-using-screening-and-progress-monitoring-tools

[x] Klingner, J. K. and Harry, B. (2006). "The Special Education Referral and Decision-Making Process for English Language Learners: Child Study Team Meetings and Placement Conferences." *Teachers College Record 108*, 2247-2281. Retrieved from https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/10.1.1.548.1121.pdf.

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